

'The Perfect Gift for Her' by evendanstevens

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Summary:

Hopper gives Joyce a much needed reminder in the form of a Christmas gift.

'The Perfect Gift for Her'

Author's Note:

HAPPY HOLIDAYS EVERYONE, I hope you're all having a wonderful day! Here, please have this jopper fic that I thought I'd churn out just before I went to sleep (so major apologies for the numerous typos) as my gift to you!

This does mention some aspects of my other fic Stay with Me Stay but you don't need to have read it to get it, also I decided to make Joyce's maiden name Horowitz in this fic just to be extra confusing I suppose...

Hope you enjoy, and Otis Redding's rendition of 'White Christmas' is your recommended reading tune.

It was Christmas Eve and so far Hopper had visited three jewellery stores, a flower shop, Anita Humphrey's clothing store and circulated the aisles of Melvald's twice now. After everything that had happened last month, his mind had been too wrapped up in giving El the perfect Christmas that he had completely forgotten to get Joyce a present.

But every where he went, nothing seemed to be right. He knew that no necklace or bouquet, scarf or whatever the hell Melvald's third aisle described as 'the perfect gift for her' would take away from the fact that Joyce really wasn't in the Christmassy mood this year. And rightly so. Her family was safe, Will was slowly adjusting back to his old self and no monsters had plagued their home for well over a month now. But at what price? He had only seen Joyce a handful of times since the night of the Snowball, but every time he had seen her, her eyes were clouded in sleep deprived bags, her skin washed of all colour and a constant troubled expression tormenting her features.

He knew she would be putting on a brave face for her boys in the lead up to Christmas, but Hopper knew in the way that her eyes glazed over sadly as they shared a cigarette in the few times he had

stopped by the house recently. He knew she was broken, grief stricken by the loss of Bob Newby, and that it was going to take time for her to heal.

Which is why now, as he stood in front of the shop window of one of the few boutiques Hawkins had to offer, he felt that any attempt to buy her a 'perfect' gift would be almost insulting. Everything he even considered seem to scream at him 'hey I know your boyfriend was just brutally slaughtered by beasts from another dimension, but hey have this green scarf, Merry Christmas!' He shook his head and trudged back to his Blazer and sat quietly behind the wheel for a moment.

Whatever he got Joyce, he knew it had to mean something. Something that wouldn't make her forget her suffering, but rather remind her of the brave woman she was, something to reassure her that things would be easier. It hit him like a bolt of lightning then. He quickly started the car and raced back to the cabin.

El looked at him in complete bewilderment when he tore through the front door like a hurricane when she let him in. He barely mumbled a 'hey, kid' before moving the couch out of the way and lifting up the loose floorboards, making his way to the storage he kept stashed away under the cabin. Her curiosity only grew when he emerged with a box she hadn't looked through before. Hopper dug through the box like a dog dug a hole in the backyard. When he finally found what he was looking for, a soft smile came across his face. This would do.

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On Christmas Eve, Hopper stopped by to drop off El at the Byers' house. While he had the whole day off with her tomorrow, it meant he had to work the night before. Joyce had happily agreed to let El come over for dinner that night, despite Hopper's repeated apologies. As El rushed off to join Will who was feeling the weight of his presents to try and guess what he would be gifted the next morning, Joyce looked up at Hopper awkwardly. Suddenly very aware that they were now standing alone in the hallway, not saying anything.

"Hey, I got you something," Hopper eventually said that made

Joyce's face widen in surprise and then confusion. It was the most true emotion he had seen displayed from her in weeks.

"Hop, you didn't have to--"

"It's nothing really," he insisted as he pulled the small rectangular box from his pocket and handed it to her. "Just something I thought you might need," he said gruffly, scratching the back of his neck.

She gave him a half smile of gratitude. "Thank you," her brown eyes widened then in a shocked realisation. "I'm so sorry, Hopper, I didn't get you anything!" she gasped, bringing a hand to her cheek in shame.

He shook his head before gesturing his eyes toward the two children now happily chatting by the Christmas tree in the living room. "This is more than enough," he returned her half smile before looking at the ground. He was suddenly feeling nervous. Nervous that she might not fully understand his present, or worse, she might hate what it insinuated. He fought an urge to snatch it back and hide it in his coat pocket, never to be spoken of again.

"Well anyway, I shouldn't be too late. I'll call you if I'm any later than 10," he grumbled, not meeting her eyes. She nodded in understanding and followed him as he made his way to the door. "See ya later," he mumbled, barely even audible or distinguishable.

He had rushed out of the door before Joyce even had a chance to wave him off.

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It was a Christmas Eve tradition in the Byers household to open one small present the night before Christmas. With Jonathan out visiting Nancy, he was missing out this year, but Joyce was happy nonetheless to be spending the evening with El and Will. Well, as happy as she could be given everything that had happened.

Joyce had laughed at the joyfully astounded face of her youngest son when he opened up his new trivial pursuit board game. She had thought it was just a silly present, but it had been all the rage in the

lead up to Christmas and Joyce was glad to see Will so enthusiastic about what appeared to her, a standard trivia game. El's face had lit up when she opened a small pack of crayons Joyce had gifted her and Will was already running through to his room to grab fresh paper for them to draw.

Joyce then found herself eyeballing the small, scrappily wrapped present Hopper had given her. She tried to make herself wait until morning, but her curiosity had gotten the better of her and she picked up the present, taking a moment to read the card.

'To Joyce,

Merry Christmas.

Love, Hopper '

While she knew he wasn't exactly a poet, she felt a slight warmth at his choice of 'love' as a signature. She turned the gift over and tore into the paper. Inside was a picture frame, but the picture meant for the frame appeared to have not yet been placed within the frame. Picking up the picture, she inspected it and felt her a stomach drop in surprise.

It had to be decades old, the way the edges had begun to appear frayed, but she could still see the picture clear as day. It was a black and white picture of herself, only she did the math and studied the clothing and concluded that she was around 17 at the time of the photograph. It was a candid photo of herself, taking from the side of her. She was sitting on the empty bleachers, leaning forward, her hair piled up in a half assed top bun, a smile on her face that seemed to indicate that she was laughing at something, a cigarette balanced between her fingers. She put it down to the candid nature of the photo and the presence of a smoking habit she was trying to hide from her father as to why she had never seen it before.

She felt her chest warm as she stared at the picture. She looked so young, and more beautiful than she remembered herself being at that age. It was taken long before the crows feet in the corner of her eyes, long before stretch mark had covered her stomach after carrying two children, long before any of the truly life ruining shit had happened

to her. She tried to remember the picture had been taken but came up blank. She had had no idea the photo was being taken, and she judged by the absence of a jacket it was relatively warm. She initially guessed it was just after the summer before her senior year but she then noticed the braided bracelet on her wrist that had been a Christmas gift and realised it was taken in the spring leading to her graduation.

Another unexpected warmth coursed through her then as she remembered that it was around this time period that her and Hopper were sort of dating. She didn't remember Hopper ever owning a camera, but their friend Ritchie had been on the newspaper committee and she figured Hopper had borrowed the camera to snap the picture of her. A concealed smile spread across her lips as memories came flooding back to her of her senior year and she found herself shaking her head at some of the more ridiculous snippets.

It was then she turned the picture to find a message on the back.

'I've watched you go through hell more times than I can count, but every time you came out smiling and stronger. This time is no different. You're stronger than you know, Horowitz.'

This time when Joyce flipped the photo back over she felt the tears spring to her eyes. The picture was taken a little under a year after her mother had died tragically in a car accident. Her mother's death had crippled her, both emotionally and physically. In the years that followed, several doctors had told her it was the event that had kickstarted her anxiety. It was the first time Joyce had felt such a pain in her life and she wasn't sure if she would ever be happy again.

But here she was in the photograph, smiling and laughing with genuine joy in her eyes. There was no hidden hurt or pain or sadness behind her gaze. She just looked blissfully delighted. Whether it had been at Hopper, or something had tickled her on the football field in front of her, the important part was that she was able to feel like that. She held the picture close to her heart, a tear slipping as she squeezed her eyes shut and let out a content sigh. It was the first time since Bob had passed away that she felt hopeful. Hopeful that one day, when her suffering had subsided just enough, she would be able to feel that joy again.

When Hopper came to pick up El, it was just before 10. He appeared to arrive just in time as Will and El were majorly crashing from their sugar rush and were on the verge of falling asleep whilst watching 'It's a Wonderful Life'. Joyce watched as he interacted with El, that warm feeling residing in the pit of her stomach this time, a small smile playing on her lips as she crossed her arms, leaning against the doorway. She chuckled slightly under her breath when Hopper rolled his eyes and scooped up the young girl into his arms after she had proclaimed that she was too tired to walk.

He was stood in the doorway, half asleep girl in his arms when he turned to Joyce, who was now looking at him with an adoration he hadn't seen from her in years. It made colour rush to his cheeks and suddenly he felt even more nervous around her than earlier that day.

"So, uh, thanks for looking after her," Hopper eventually said after staring at her for a little longer than what was considered proper.

Joyce looked at her feet, feeling awkward. She had no idea how to tell him how much she appreciated his gift, how it had been exactly what she needed. She wanted to tell him just how grateful she was, but then she remembered who was standing in front of her. This large, infamously melancholy and blunt man, had made her feel strong and brave in a way no one else ever had. It scared her how much he had a hold of her emotions in a way he probably had no idea about. It was one of the few times in her life that she had felt intimidated by Jim Hopper.

"Oh it's no problem, she wasn't any trouble," Joyce shook her head and waved her hand, a snort escaping her as she scoffed and her cheeks immediately reddened she felt like an idiot.

The noise made Hopper's eyes light up with amusement and he smiled at her, a genuine smile that stretched to his ears and flashed his teeth and made Joyce's heart flutter all of a sudden. That god damn Jim Hopper smile.

"Well," he tilted his head toward El who's tight grip on his jacket was slowly loosening as sleep began to overcome her. "G'night, Joyce," he

looked back at her.

Joyce whispered a goodbye as she watched Hopper walk out the door and back to his Blazer. Surprisingly, she didn't close the door straight away. Instead she leaned against the door and watched him again as she had moments before. The frigid cold of the winter air didn't bother her as she observed Hopper gently tucking El into the passenger seat. He didn't seem to notice Joyce watching him as he moved around to the other side of the Blazer to the driver's seat.

His hand was almost on the handle when Joyce took a deep breath and cursed herself internally.

"Hopper!" she yelled after him. He quickly spun round on his heel and looked up at her, completely baffled when he caught sight of her quickly shuffling across the lawn to come meet him.

"Joyce, what the hell are you doing? You'll freeze out here!" he contended as she approached him. She didn't say anything when she met him, toe to toe. She shivered ever so slightly in the cold but when she looked up at him with those big, brown doe eyes any thought he had of further questioning her motives went straight out the window.

He was looking down at her with wide, inquisitive and waiting eyes. His mouth hung open with confusion mixed with a the slightest hint of anticipation. Despite his concern, it was such a soft expression that Joyce couldn't help but find it endearing. She smiled then before reaching up on her tip toes and placing the most gentle of kisses on his lips. It lasted no longer than three seconds, yet she still lightly held onto the front of his jacket to support himself.

When she pulled away from him and returned her heels to the ground, his face seemed to indicate that he was still trying to process what had just happened. She blushed when his lips curled into a dumbfounded smile and he looked down at her.

"Merry Christmas, Hop," she whispered happily. She didn't give him a chance to answer before turning around and walking back to the house, hugging herself as the cold began to prickle at her skin.

When Joyce closed the door, Jim got into his car and sat at the steering wheel, contemplating again as he had earlier that day. He had stopped denying his feelings for Joyce months ago, making it impossible to contain the grin that came across his face. If it had gone his way, had he known Joyce was going to kiss him, he would've wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her close to him, not letting her go until they were both gasping for breath.

But he knew Joyce wasn't ready for that. He knew she still needed time to piece herself back together, and he would wait. Forever if he had to. And so he agreed to himself that at that moment, the smallest of kisses from Joyce Byers was more than enough.

At least for now.